DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 276 836 CE 045 890

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TITLE	Our Literacy Report Card. Research in Brief.
INSTITUTION	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	IS-87-102rib
PUB DATE	Nov 86
NOTE	3p.; For related documents, see ED 275 692 and ED 275 701.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research/Technical (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Literacy; Blacks; *Daily Living Skills; *Educational Needs; *Functional Literacy; Functional Reading; Hispanic Americans; *Literacy; Minority Groups; Whites; *Young Adults

ABSTRACT

Although the majority of today's young adults meet or surpass the "literacy" standards of 25 years ago, they often lack the level of literacy needed to meet current demands. The National Assessment of Educational Progress studied a nationally representative sample of 3,600 young American adults, aged 21 to 25, to determine how well they could perform real work survival skills. While the overwhelming majority of young adults adequately performs tasks at the lower levels of proficiency, sizable numbers appear unable to do well on tasks of even moderate complexity. Findings included the following: (1) about 80 percent were unable to use a bus schedule; (2) approximately 63 percent could not follow directions using a map; (3) only about 27 percent could interpret a lengthy newspaper feature story; (4) about 28 percent were unable to write a letter protesting a billing error; (5) about 3 percent could not enter personal information on a job application; (6) about 21 percent were unable to locate the gross pay-to-date on a pay stub; (7) about 16 percent had trouble completing an address on an order form; and (8) about 34 percent had difficulty summarizing in writing an argument made in a lengthy newspaper editorial. On average, black young adults performed at levels significantly below white young adults, with Hispanics about midway between the groups. The report concluded that more appropriate intervention and prevention strategies must be developed to remedy these deficits. (KC)

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Research in Brief

Chester E. Finn, Jr., Assistant Secretary

William J. Bennett, Secretary

Our Literacy Report Card

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How literate are America's young adults?

The answer depends on what standard you use. If the standard of literacy is that of 100 years ago -- that is, the ability to sign one's name -- then virtually all our young adults are literate.

If the standard of the World War II era is applied, almost 95 percent of them meet or exceed the performance of fourth-grade students. Or if applying the "War on Poverty" standard of 25 years ago, 80 percent meet or exceed the performance of students in eighth grade.

But what about today's standards?

The National Assessment of Educational Progress, with support from a U.S. Department of Education grant, attempted to answer that question by evaluating a nationally representative sample of 3,600 young American adults, 21- to 25-years-old. A variety of tasks was used to simulate the diversity of literacy activities that people encounter.

They were judged on how well they could perform such real world skills as reading a map, interpreting a newspaper article, determining the amount of interest from a loan adevertisement and filling out a job application.

The report, entitled "Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults," concludes that while the overwhelming majority of young adults adequately perform tasks at the lower levels of proficiency, "sizable numbers appear unable to do well on tasks of even moderate complexity. Only a relatively small percentage of this group is estimated to perform at levels typified by the more complex and challenging tasks."

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While young adults were found to be better educated than at any time in our history, some ominous information was uncovered:

- About four out of five young Americans were unable to use a bus schedule to select an appropriate bus for departures and arrivals;
- Approximately 63 percent could not follow directions to travel from one location to another using a map;
- Only about 27 percent could interpret a lengthy feature story in a newspaper;
- Roughly 28 percent were unable to write a letter to state that an error had been made in billing;
- About 3 percent could not be expected to enter personal information on a job application, and almost 4 percent could not write a few lines about a job that interests them;
- Approximately 21 percent were unable to locate the gross pay-to-date on a pay stub;
- About 16 percent had trouble completing an address on an order form; and
- Some 34 percent had problems summarizing in writing an argument made in a lengthy newspaper editorial.

(An individual had an 80 percent chance of consistently performing each of these tasks successfully.)

In addition, some of the 3,600 young adults were randomly given oral tasks to evaluate their speaking skills.

One exercise involved a potentially important survial skill -- providing sufficient information to the fire department about a fire at home. Thirteen percent did not respond with adequate information for the fire department.

In another exercise, these same young adults were tested on how well they could give directions to the grocery store. Fifty-three percent were judged inadequate; they could not give proper directions. And, almost half (46.3 percent) were unable to provide an adequate description of a movie or TV show.

The study was conducted by the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, New Jersey. The authors, Irwin S. Kirsch and Ann Jungeblut of ETS, expressed special concern about the educational achievement of minorities.

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IS 87-102rib

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On average, black young adults performed at levels significantly below white young adults, while Hispanic young adults were about midway between their black and white peers.

"The relatively poor performance of minority group members and those who terminated their education early, combined with projected changes in demographics for the 21- to 25-year-old population, suggest that unless we develop and implement more appropriate intervention and prevention strategies, America will have a less literate pool of young adults to fill its human resource needs over the next decade or so," the study warned.

Thomas G. Sticht, a noted educational researcher in San Diego, supports the authors' sentiment in a foreword to the report. He wrote, "If something substantial is not done to increase minority achievement, the general capability of our nation's human resources will decline significantly in the coming decades. What will be done?

"On the one hand, we should, as a nation, celebrate Literate America, for the last century has witnessed the remarkable feat of bringing more than 95 percent of adults to levels of literacy . . . .

"Yet, by the standards of the information age," Sticht continued, "we should press harder for more rigorous education and training in the knowledge and information processing skills that limit the flexibility of the 50 percent or so of adults who possess 'mid-level' literacy."

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Copies of the report (No. 16-PL-02) may be obtained by sending $12.50 plus a $1.50 handling fee to: the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Educational Testing Service, Rosedale Road, Princeton, NJ 08541.

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November 1986